

**U.S. Department of Justice**

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Eastern District of Virginia*

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**PRESS RELEASE**

Paul J. McNulty, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, announced that Eric Mario Byers, age 32, of Virginia Beach, Virginia, was found guilty of seven felony charges including conspiracy to distribute over five kilograms of cocaine, over 50 grams of crack, and possession of an unregistered machinegun late yesterday evening by a federal jury in Norfolk, following a three day trial. Sentencing has been set for May 9, 2003. Two of the charges carry a minimum of ten years and a maximum of life imprisonment.

The federal charges arose out of a narcotics investigation initially conducted by the Virginia Beach Police Department in October 2001. The case was adopted for federal prosecution in April, 2002, and was further investigated by the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) under Project Safe Neighborhoods/EXILE. At trial, the government produced evidence that the defendant was receiving large shipments of cocaine and marihuana from suppliers in Southern California by mail and by vehicles being driven from California to Norfolk and Virginia Beach. Byers paid about \$15,000 a kilogram to his suppliers and sold the cocaine locally in bulk for \$23,000 a kilogram. He also cooked some of it into crack. Robert Wingfield, age 50, of Virginia Beach, who at the time was a teacher in a local high school, was a crack addict who had long purchased crack from Byers, and started assisting Byers in 2000 by picking up packages of drugs for Byers at various addresses to which they had been mailed from California, and by allowing him to store cocaine, crack cocaine, marihuana, and crystal meth at his house. Wingfield testified at trial to his dealings with Byers. Wingfield pled guilty to cocaine conspiracy in July, 2002, and was sentenced in October, 2002.

When arrested October 24, 2001, Byers had crack cocaine and paraphernalia for cooking crack at his house, a loaded fully automatic UZI submachinegun, and over \$12,000 cash. The day before he had given Wingfield a large package containing \$15,000 in cash concealed in a CD radio to ship to cocaine suppliers in California as a down payment on a very large shipment of cocaine. That package was intercepted by Virginia Beach police. Later, they searched Wingfield's home and recovered cocaine, marihuana, and crack belonging to Byers. Another co-conspirator also testified. He is serving federal time on drug charges stemming from his arrest in Texas in 2001 while on a trip to deliver marihuana and crystal meth to Byers.

Project EXILE is a multi-agency joint federal and state task force targeting armed criminals for prosecution in federal court for possession or use of firearms in violation of federal laws. It is a

part of Project Safe Neighborhoods, a nationwide effort by the Department of Justice aimed at reducing violent crimes. Since its inception locally by the U.S. Attorney in December 1997, Project EXILE has resulted in federal convictions in the Hampton Roads area of over 593 armed criminals whose average sentences exceed nine years and the recovery of over 1,023 firearms as of January 1, 2003.

Byers' case was investigated by ATF and officers from the Virginia Beach Police Department, with additional support from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and U.S. Postal Inspectors. The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney James A. Metcalfe.